

Boycott Victory Made King a National Figure

Fifth of ten installments from "The Days of Martin Luther King Jr."

Chapter V

The bus boycott in Montgomery led by Martin Luther King Jr. went into its eleventh month, and tempers were short. The Supreme Court fight was still pending.

The City Commission ordered city attorneys, in late October, 1956, to press for a state injunction against operating a car pool. Dr. King, who felt safe in federal court, asked U.S. Judge Frank M. Johnson for a restraining order. The judge refused. The car pool, the only transportation artery the blacks had, was in jeopardy. A hearing was ordered for Tuesday, Nov. 13.

The city began to hope it could crush nonviolence. The Saturday before the hearing, the Ku Klux Klan decided to hood itself and hold a rally in Montgomery. Press photographers began to shoot pictures. The city sent police reserves and ordered the Ku Klux Klan out of town. The organization was told that it could not hold a rally in the city without a permit, and Mayor Gayle would not issue one.

In the streets, the blacks were joyous. Mortal terror had been transformed into low comedy. That old devil boogeyman, the Klan, had been booted in the behind and run out of town.

When court convened on Tuesday, the City of Montgomery opened its argument by specifying that the proceedings opposed the use of 300 automobiles and 20 station wagons operating as a private, unlicensed, unchartered means of public conveyance by a so-called organization calling itself the Montgomery Improvement Association. Because of this, the city had lost taxes from the licensed and properly chartered Montgomery Bus Line in excess of \$15,000 and would like the court to note that it was asking compensation. The city attorney further contended that the so-called car pool was a public nuisance.

The blacks asserted that the MIA car pool was nothing more than a neighborhood share-the-ride plan designed temporarily to protest racial inequity on the Montgomery Bus Line.

Toward the end of the morning session there was a sudden stirring, as a reporter moved across the front of the court, bringing a frown from the judge. He handed a short sheet of paper to the mayor. Gayle read it, stood abruptly, and left the court.

The reporter tiptoed over to Martin Luther King. "Here," he said, "is the decision you have been waiting for. Read this release."

It read: (AP) Washington D.C.—The United States Supreme Court today affirmed a decision of a special three-judge U.S. District Court in declaring Ala-



The Rev. Glenn Smiley and Dr. King aboard Montgomery bus in December, 1956, after boycott victory.

bama's state and local laws requiring segregation on buses unconstitutional. The Supreme Court acted without listening to any argument; it simply said "The motion to affirm is granted and the judgment is affirmed."

Dr. King read it twice. He couldn't seem to absorb the news. He said later that he could hear his heart beat within his ears. Usually, his decorum in any situation was cool and mannerly. This time he lost it. He got up from his chair like an old man, still holding the paper, and walked back up the aisle to his wife.

White Montgomery was disconsolate. Three hundred years of tradition had been ground into dust by nine strangers who didn't understand. The blacks were cautiously jubilant. They believed the news and could not believe it. The radio announced that the Klan would ride that night, in spite of a Montgomery order to leave town. At 5 p.m. Judge Carter entered a restraining order against the car pool. It was anticlimactic, a feeble and almost comical protest of an inferior court to the Supreme Court, but Judge Carter, no matter what his juridical feelings, had to continue to live among the whites.

In the evening, forty automobiles loaded with white-hooded men in conical hats drove through the several black ghettos. In times past, the blacks extinguished their lights, and the hooded figures fired guns in air or

through windows. This time, the blacks turned their porch lights on and sat and watched the parade. They did not exult, and they drew no fire.

At a meeting the next night the black people were asked to endorse a decision by the executive board of the MIA to call off the boycott, but to refrain from boarding buses until the decree was served on the officials of the city. The people agreed. In the following few weeks, the blacks assembled in churches to be taught how to practice restraint in buses in the face of racist taunts.

On Dec. 21, 1956, Martin Luther King Jr. assembled a few friends at 5 a.m. in his home. Bernard Lee stood on the porch to watch the first bus come by. Ralph Abernathy was present; so was the white minister—a Southerner born—Dr. Glenn Smiley. On the sidewalk, television cameras had been set up, and lights focused on the sign that said BUS STOP.

At 5:55 a.m. King, Smiley, and Abernathy stepped out onto the porch, saw the empty bus coming, headlights on full, and walked down to the corner. The bus sighed to a stop, the front doors flipped open, and King deposited three dimes as the small crowd gaped.

The white driver, sounding like a gentle satire on the Dr. Livingstone and Stanley dialogue in deepest Africa, said, "I believe you are the Rev. King, aren't you?"

King saw the broad smile

and, nonplussed, said, "Yes, I am."

The driver snapped the doors shut and said, "We are glad to have you this morning." There were few incidents that first day.

It is a diamond-hard truth that as the year 1957 arrived, one man profited hugely from the Montgomery boycott. Dr. King was a national figure, a dark comet arching high and alone in the heavens. There were offers of full professorships at \$50,000 to \$75,000 per year; a lecture tour at \$1,000 to \$1,500 per talk; a cover story by Time magazine; a bid from Harper & Row to write a book.

In Montgomery, Ala., the black took silent solace in his victory over the White Establishment. Often, around the family table, he referred to King as L.L.J., which meant Little Lord Jesus. This was his hero, and more than his hero. This was his people's leader, come on earth to deliver the indentured from Egypt.

Perhaps King's greatest accomplishment was that for the first time the white people of the United States were being forced to study the black man and his problems. For the first time, scores of millions of Americans who had seen blacks without ever noticing or caring, began to feel the pangs of conscience. Surprisingly, now that it had achieved victory through strength, the MIA fell apart. Meetings were called, but the blacks were exhausted. Attendance fell off; the receipt of funds

did not expect action. The Eisenhower administration had "leaked" information that it would not pursue racial problems.

The new organization of ministers adjourned after sessions in Atlanta to meet again in New Orleans, this time to elect Martin Luther King Jr. president and also to name the group the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Once more, King had been projected into "the picture" and was standing front and center, a place he desired and deserved.

When he got back to Montgomery, he was told that the mayor and commissioner used recent bombings of a number of Negro churches and homes as an excuse to cancel all bus service. As always, Dr. King called a church mass meeting at once.

At the meeting, King broke down. He had asked the people to join him in a prayer asking for divine guidance. Suddenly, all the frustrations choked him, and he burst into tears. "Lord," he shouted, "I hope no one will have to die as a result of our struggle for freedom in Montgomery. Certainly, I don't want to die. But if anyone has to die, let it be me, Lord." Two ministers grabbed King around the middle to keep him from falling. They half carried him to a chair and begged him to sit. The newspapers reported tersely that Martin Luther King had "collapsed" at a meeting.

Officially, the City of Montgomery continued to apply pressure. Ordinances were passed making it a crime for whites, blacks to play together or even to share the same playgrounds.

"L.L.J.," the leader who had proclaimed the honor of going to jail rather than obey "unjust laws," paid a \$500 fine to the Montgomery court on his earlier conviction for violating the anti-boycott law. Some of the other members of the MIA, who had remained in jail for months, were released in a tactical "amnesty," which also freed five whites held on charges of bombing. By unspoken agreement, both sides began to retreat from further confrontations.

Nor did the President of the United States want to get into the struggle. He chilled King's hopes by not responding to the invitation to go South and make a major speech.

As though to revenge himself on Eisenhower, Dr. King, through the SCLC, sent a second letter to the President asking for a White House conference on effective remedial steps are not taken, we will be compelled to initiate a mighty Prayer Pilgrimage to Washington." It was meant as a threat. The response, from a Presidential aide, was that the "moment is unpropitious." Plans for the Prayer Pilgrimage were begun.

NEXT: Assassination attempt.